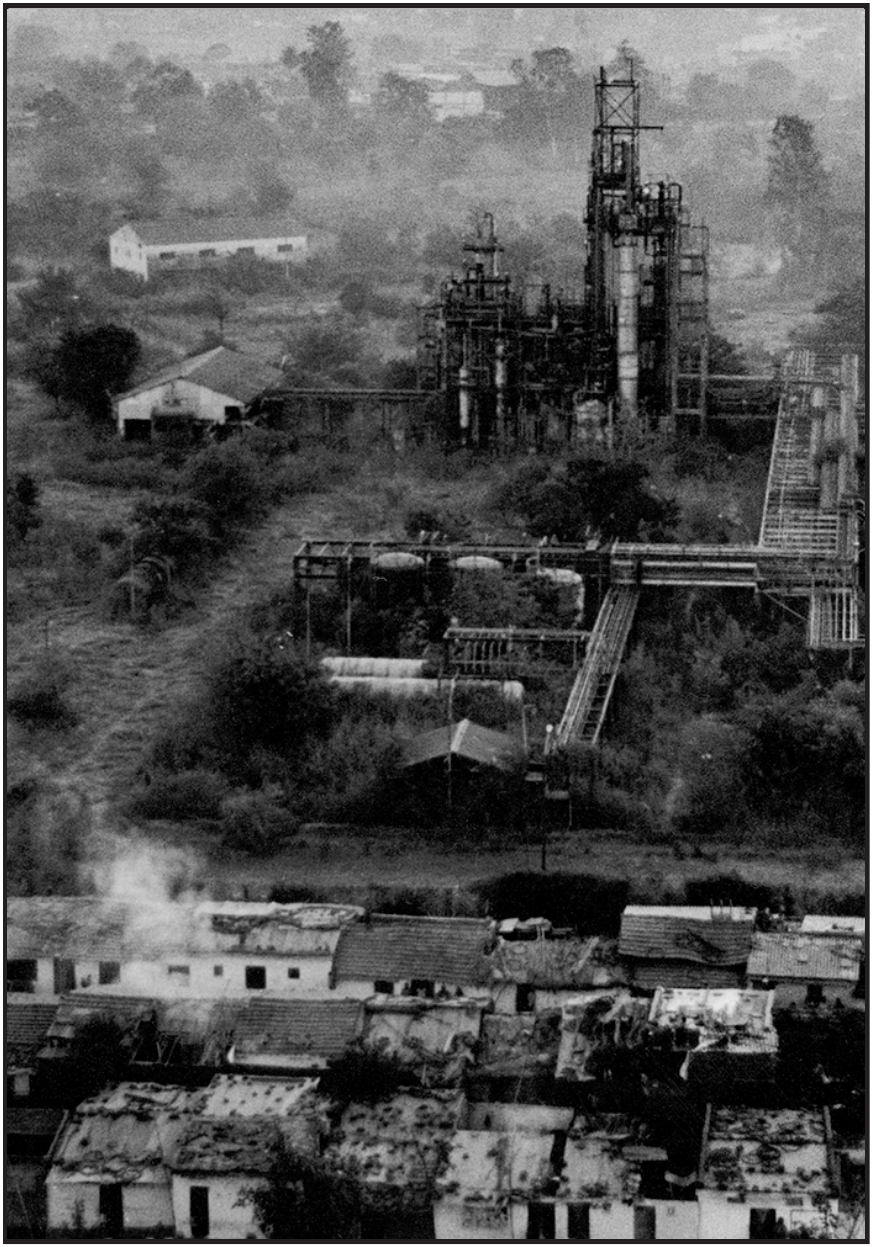

We All Live in Bhopal

David Watson

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Introduction

This essay was first published in the American radical ecological journal Fifth Estate, shortly after the Bhopal chemical explosion, a day of death that is still killing to this day. Children are born deformed or dead, land destroyed. Those who survived the initial massacre — industrial refugee families who fled the chemical cloud are watching each other slowly die of cancer and other pollution/stress related 'diseases'.

The cinders of the funeral pyres at Bhopal are still warm and the mass graves still fresh, but the media prostitutes of the corporations have already begun their homilies in defense of industrialism and its uncounted horrors. Some 3,000 people were slaughtered in the wake of the deadly gas cloud, and 20,000 will remain permanently disabled. The poison gas left a 25 square mile swathe of dead and dying people and animals as it drifted southeast away from the Union Carbide factory. "We thought it was the plague," said one victim. Indeed it was: a chemical plague, an industrial plague. Ashes, ashes, all fall down!

A terrible, unfortunate, "accident", we are reassured by the propaganda apparatus for Progress, for History, for "Our Modern

Way of Life." A price, of course, has to be paid — since the risks are necessary to ensure a higher Standard of Living, a Better Way of Life.

The Wall Street Journal, tribune of the bourgeoisie, editorialized: "It is worthwhile to remember that the Union Carbide insecticide plant and the people surrounding it were where they were for compelling reasons. India's agriculture has been thriving, bringing a better life to millions of rural people, and partly because of the use of modern agriculture technology that includes the application of insect killers". The indisputable fact of life, according to this sermon, is the universal recognition that India, like everyone else, "needs technology. Calcutta style scenes of human privation can be replaced as fast as the country imports the benefits of the West's industrial revolution and market economics." So despite the dangers involved, "the benefits outweigh the costs." (13/12/84)

The Journal was certainly right in one regard — the reasons for the plant and the people's presence there are certainly compelling: capitalist market relations and technological invasion are as compelling as a hurricane to the small communities from which those people were uprooted. It conveniently failed to note, however, that countries like India do not import the benefits of industrial capitalism; those benefits are exported in the form of loan repayments to fill the coffers of the bankers and corporate vampires who read the Wall Street Journal for the latest news of their investments. The Indians only take the risks and pay the costs; in fact, for them, as for all the immiserated masses of people living in the shantytowns of the Third World, there are no risks, only certain hunger and disease, only the certainty of the death squads' revenge for criticizing the state of things as they are.

The Green Revolution is a Nightmare

In fact, the Calcutta style misery is the result of Third World industrialization and the so-called industrial 'Green Revolution' in agriculture. The Green Revolution, which was to revolutionize agriculture in the "backward" countries and produce greater crop yields, has only been a miracle for the banks, corporations and military dictatorships who defend them. The influx of fertilizers, technology, insecticides and bureaucratic administration exploded millennia-old rural economies based on subsistence farming, creating a class of wealthier farmers dependent upon western technologies to produce cash crops such as coffee, cotton and wheat for export, while the vast majority of farming communities were destroyed by capitalist market competition and sent like refugees into the growing cities. These victims, paralleling the destroyed peasantry of Europe's Industrial Revolution several hundred years before, joined either the permanent underclass of unemployed and underemployed slum dwellers eking out a survival on the tenuous margins of civilization, or became cannon-fodder in the Bhopals, Sao Paulos and Jakartas of an industrializing world — an industrialization process, like all industrializations in History, paid for by the pillage of nature and human beings in the countryside.

Food production goes up in some cases, of course, because the measure is only quantitative — some foods disappear while others are produced year round, even for export. But Subsistence is destroyed. Not only does the rural landscape begin to suffer the consequences of constant crop production and use of chemicals, but the masses of people — laborers on the land and in the teeming hovels growing around the industrial plants — go hungrier in a vicious cycle of exploitation, while the wheat goes abroad to buy absurd commodities and weapons.

But subsistence is culture as well: culture is destroyed with subsistence, and people are further trapped in the technological

labyrinth. The ideology of progress is there, blared louder than ever by those with something to hide, a cover-up for plunder and murder on levels never before witnessed.

Industrialization of the Third World

The Industrialization of the Third World is a story familiar to anyone who takes even a glance at what is occurring. The colonial countries are nothing but a dumping ground and pool of cheap labor for capitalist corporations. Obsolete technology is shipped there along with the production of chemicals, medicines and other products banned in the developed world. Labor is cheap, there are few if any safety standards, costs are cut. But the formula of cost benefit still stands: the costs are simply borne by others, the victims of Union Carbide, Dow, and Standard Oil.

Chemicals found to be dangerous and banned in Europe and the U.S. are produced instead overseas — DDT is a well-known example of an enormous number of such products, such as the unregistered pesticide Leptophos exported by the Velsicol Corporation to Egypt which killed and injured many Egyptian farmers in the mid 1970's. Other products are simply dumped on Third World markets, like the mercury tainted wheat which led to the death of as many as 5,000 Iraqis in 1972, wheat which had been exported from the U.S. Another example was the wanton contamination of Nicaragua's lake Managua by a chlorine caustic soda factory owned by Pennwalt Corporation and other investors, which caused a major outbreak of mercury poisoning in a primary source of fish for the people living in Managua.

Union Carbide's plant at Bhopal did not even meet U.S. safety standards according to its own safety inspector, but a U.N. expert on international corporate behavior told the New York

Times, "A whole list of factors is not in place to insure adequate Industrial safety" throughout the Third World. "Carbide is not very different from any other chemical company in this regard." According to the Times, "In a Union Carbide battery plant in Jakarta, Indonesia, more than half of the workers had kidney damage from mercury exposure. In an asbestos cement factory owned by the Manville Corporation 200 miles west of Bhopal, workers in 1981 were routinely covered with asbestos dust, a practice that would never be tolerated here." (12/9/84)

Some 22,500 people are killed every year by exposure to insecticides — a much higher percentage of them in the Third World than use of such chemicals would suggest. Many experts decry the lack of an "Industrial Culture" in the "underdeveloped" countries as a major cause of accidents and contamination. But where an "industrial culture" thrives, is the situation really better?

Industrial Culture & Industrial Plague

In the advanced industrial nations an "industrial culture" (and little other) exists. Have such disasters been avoided as the claims of these experts would have us believe?

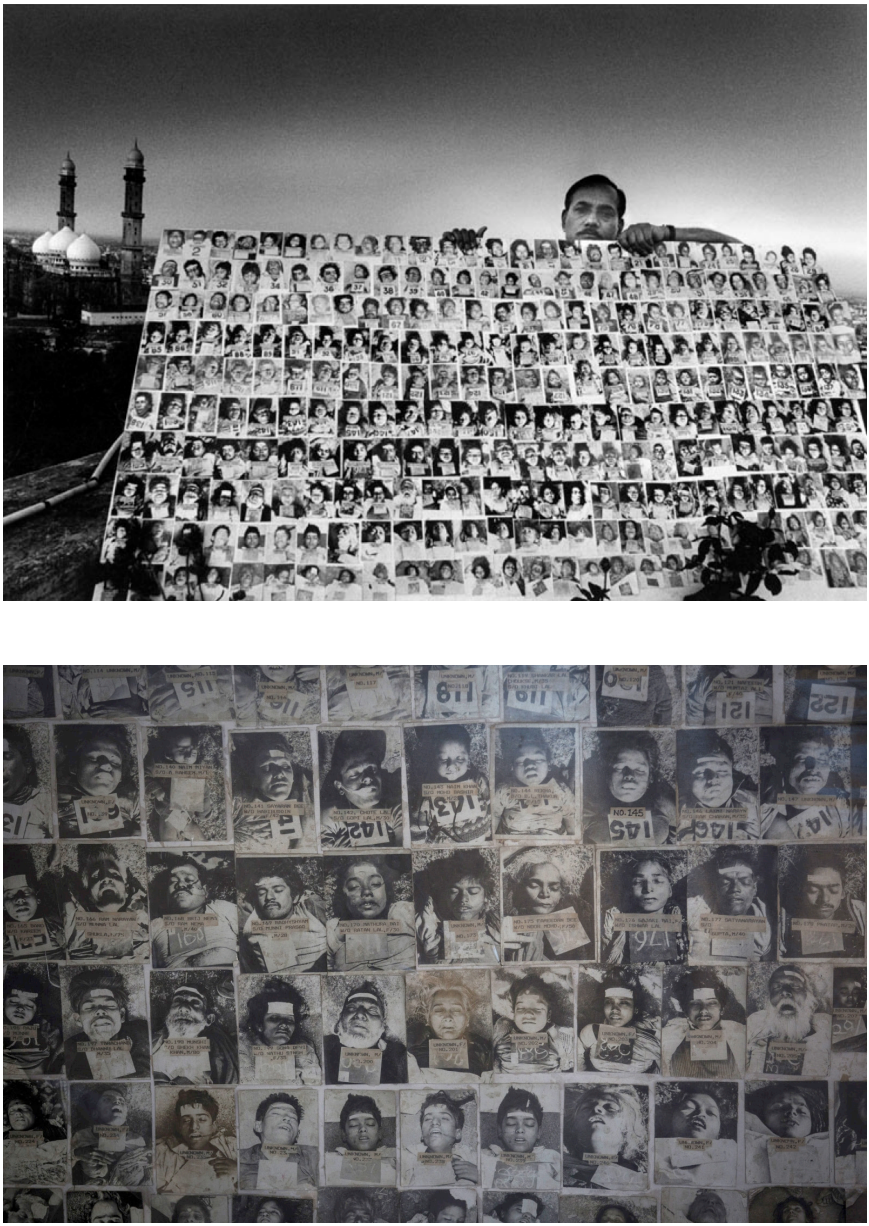
Another event of such mammoth proportions as those of Bhopal would suggest otherwise — in this case, industrial pollution killed some 4,000 people in a large population center. That was in London, in 1952, when several days of "normal" pollution accumulated in stagnant air to kill and permanently injure thousands of Britons.

Then there are the disasters closer to home or to memory, for example, the Love Canal (still leaking into the Great lakes water systems), or the massive dioxin contaminations at Seveso,

Italy and Times Beach, Missouri, where thousands of residents had to be permanently evacuated. And there is the Berlin and Farro dump at Swart Creek, Michigan, where C-56 (a pesticide by-product of Love Canal fame), hydrochloric acid and cyanide from Flint auto plants had accumulated. "They think we're not scientists and not even educated," said one enraged resident, "but anyone who's been to high school knows that cyanide and hydrochloric Acid is what they mixed to kill people in the concentration camps."

A powerful image: industrial civilization as one vast, stinking extermination camp. We all live in Bhopal, some closer to the gas chambers and to the mass graves, but all of us close enough to be victims. And Union Carbide is obviously not a fluke — the poisons are vented in the air and water, dumped in rivers, ponds and streams, fed to the animals to go to market (mad cows in a mad world), sprayed on lawns and roadways, sprayed on food crops, every day, everywhere. The result may not be as dramatic as Bhopal (which then almost comes to serve as a diversion, a deterrence machine to take our minds off the pervasive reality which Bhopal truly represents), but it is deadly. When ABC News asked University of Chicago professor of public health and the author of 'The Politics of Cancer', Jason Epstein, if he thought a Bhopal style disaster could occur in the U.S., he replied: "I think what we're seeing in America is far more slow — not such large accidental leakages with the result that you have an excess of cancers or reproductive abnormalities."

In fact, birth defects have doubled in the last 25 years. And cancer is on the rise. In an interview with the Guardian, Hunter College professor David Kotelchuck described the "cancer atlas' maps published in 1975 by the Department of Health, Education & Welfare. "Show me a red spot on these maps and I'll show you an industrial center of the U.S.", he said. "there aren't any place names on the maps but you can easily pick out concentrations of industry. See, it's not Pennsylvania that's red,



Images of the victims of the 1984 Bhopal disaster. Officially, at least 3,787 people were killed, but the death toll could be as high as 16,000. At least 550,000 people were injured by the disaster.

it's just Philadelphia, Erie & Pittsburgh. Look at West Virginia here, there's only two red spots, the Kanawha Valley, where there are nine chemical plants including Union Carbide's and this industrialized stretch of the Ohio River. It's the same story wherever you look."

There are 50,000 toxic waste dumps in the U.S. The EPA admits that 90% of the 90 billion pounds of toxic waste produced annually by U.S. industry (70 % of it by chemical companies) is disposed of "improperly" (although we wonder what they would consider "proper" disposal). These deadly products of industrial civilization — arsenic, mercury, dioxin, cyanide, and many others — are simply dumped, "legally" and "illegally" wherever is convenient to industry. Some 66,000 different compounds are used in Industry. Nearly a billion tons of pesticides and herbicides comprising 225 different chemicals were produced in the U.S. last year (1984), and an additional 79 million pounds were imported. Some 2% of chemical compounds have been tested for side effects. There are 15,000 chemical plants in the U.S., daily manufacturing mass death.

All of the dumped chemicals are leeching into our water. Some three to four thousand wells, depending on which government agency you ask, are contaminated or closed in the U.S. In Michigan alone, 24 municipal water systems have been contaminated, and a thousand sites have suffered major contamination. According to the Detroit Free Press, "The final toll could be as many as 10,000 sites" in Michigan's "water wonderland" alone (14/4/84).

The cover-ups go unabated here as in the Third world. One example is that of dioxin; during the proceedings around the Agent Orange investigations, it came out that Dow Chemical had lied all along about the effects of Dioxin. Despite research findings that Dioxin is "exceptionally toxic" with "a tremendous potential for producing Chloracne and systematic injury," Dow's

top toxicologist, V.K. Rowe, wrote in 1965, "We are not in any way attempting to hide our problems under a heap of sand. But we certainly do not want to have any situations arise which will cause the regulatory agencies to become restrictive."

Now Vietnam suffers a liver cancer epidemic and a host of cancers and health problems caused by the massive use of Agent Orange there during the genocidal war waged by the U.S. The sufferings of U.S. veterans are only a drop in the bucket. And Dioxin is appearing everywhere in our environment as well, in the form of "dioxin rain".

Going To The Village

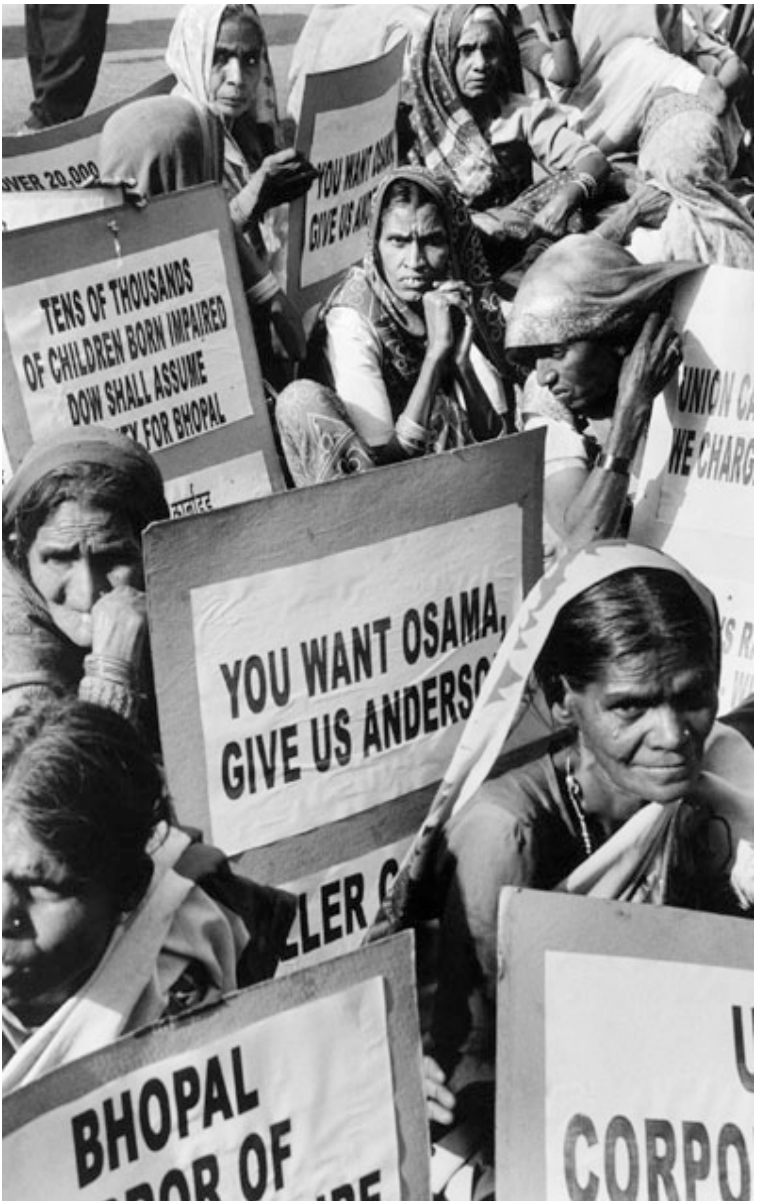
When the Indian authorities and Union Carbide began to process the remaining gases in the Bhopal plant, thousands of residents fled, despite the reassurances of the authorities. The New York Times quoted one man, who said, "They are not believing the scientists or the State government or anybody. They only want to save their lives."

The same reporter wrote that one man had gone to the train station with his goats, "hoping that he could take them with him — anywhere, as long as it was away from Bhopal." (14/12/84) The same old man quoted above told the reporter, "All the public has gone to the village". The reporter explained that "going to the village" is what Indians do when trouble comes. A wise and age old strategy for survival by which little communities always renewed themselves when bronze, iron and golden empires with clay feet fell to their ruin. But subsistence has been and is everywhere being destroyed, and with it, culture. What are we to do when there is no village to go to? When we all live in Bhopal, and Bhopal is everywhere? The comments of two women, one a refugee from Times Beach, Missouri, and another

from Bhopal, come to mind. The first woman said of her former home, "This was a nice place once. Now we have to bury it." The other woman said, "Life cannot come back. Can the government pay for the lives? Can you bring those people back?"

The corporate vampires are guilty of greed, plunder, murder, slavery, extermination and devastation. We should avoid any pangs of sentimentalism when the time comes for them to pay for their crimes against humanity and the natural world. But we will have to go beyond them, to ourselves: subsistence, and with it culture, has been destroyed. We have to find our way back to the village, out of industrial civilization, out of this exterminist system.

The Union Carbides, the Warren Andersons, the "optimistic experts" and the lying propagandists all must go, but with them must go the pesticides, the herbicides, the chemical factories and the chemical way of life which is nothing but death. Because this is Bhopal, and it's all we've got. This "once nice place" can't be simply buried for us to move on to another pristine beginning. We must find our way back to the village, or as the North American natives said, "back to the blanket," and we must do this not by trying to save an industrial civilization which is doomed, but in that renewal of life which must take place in its ruin. By throwing off this Modern Way of Life, we won't be "giving things up" or sacrificing, but throwing off a terrible burden. Let us do so soon before we are crushed.



Survivors of the Bhopal disaster march in September 2006, demanding the extradition of Warren Anderson. Anderson was the Chair and CEO of Union Carbide at the time of the disaster. Anderson died in 2014 without ever facing trial.

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